

Golden Eyes

Chapter 9: The Saint of Couplets

Zhuang Rui, slightly impatient and even a bit rough, pushed aside the letters and notes inside the box. At the bottom of the box, the two scrolls, approximately fifty centimeters long, were revealed. Without examining them closely, **Zhuang Rui** eagerly took the scrolls out, though he handled them with comparative care. At this moment, these two scrolls were undoubtedly the most important things in his heart.

One must know that ever since that strand of **Spiritual Qi** appeared in his eyes, **Zhuang Rui** had been constantly trying to find ways to increase its quantity. After being depleted twice, the **Spiritual Qi** was now extremely thin, and he had no way to replenish it. Although he could now control whether the **Spiritual Qi** was released, **Zhuang Rui**'s gaze had been wandering these past few days when interacting with people, fearing he might accidentally release the **Spiritual Qi**. If the **Spiritual Qi** in his eyes were truly exhausted, he would be left utterly heartbroken.

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He hadn't felt this way in a long time. As he held the two scrolls, even though **Zhuang Rui** didn't know if they were paintings or banners, he could feel his heart pounding "thump-thump," as if it were about to jump out of his throat.

Ignoring the dust on the scrolls, **Zhuang Rui** carefully placed them on his bed, then walked to the bathroom. Only after splashing his face with cold tap water did his mood finally calm down.

Returning to his room, **Zhuang Rui** did not open the scrolls. Instead, he sat on the bed, placed the scrolls on his lap, and focused his gaze on them. A blue light flashed, and the **Spiritual Qi** left his eye, projecting onto the scrolls. But the result disappointed **Zhuang Rui**, because the quantity of **Spiritual Qi** returning to his eyes did not increase again. The experiment was the same as when he had previously X-rayed ordinary books; he could only see through the scrolls to the objects underneath.❀❀❀❀❀

“Where exactly did things go wrong?”

Zhuang Rui was slightly disappointed, but this result was bearable. After all, the amount of **Spiritual Qi** had definitely increased previously. What he needed now was to find the correct method to increase the **Spiritual Qi** in his eyes. He hadn't initially expected to be able to repeatedly absorb **Spiritual Qi** from these two scrolls.

Zhuang Rui got up, found a clean towel, wiped the dust off the outside of the two scrolls, then opened them and spread them flat on his bed.

After opening the scrolls, **Zhuang Rui** found that they were two pieces of calligraphy. One read: “How do I know the Phoenix is not inferior to me?” (**How can you know that the phoenix is**

not as good as me?). The other read: “Eat clams and stop asking Heaven.” (**And Rikyu asked the heavens about eating clams.**). The inscription above was the two characters: “Da Fang.” Below the inscription was a red seal with four characters: Da Fang Shi Wen.

These two pieces of calligraphy were written with vigor and freshness, executed smoothly and unrestrainedly, giving them a sense of freedom. Although **Zhuang Rui** did not understand calligraphy, he knew the author had a deep foundation. Seeing that the paper used for these two works was slightly yellowed, and the wooden axis on both sides was somewhat faded, and considering they were collected by his grandfather, they should at least predate the founding of the nation.

Zhuang Rui had never heard of this person, Da Fang, but it wouldn't be too difficult to figure out Da Fang's background. If he didn't know, he could just ask **Uncle De**.

Thinking of this, **Zhuang Rui** immediately picked up the phone and called **Uncle De**. After the call connected, **Uncle De**'s robust voice came through: “Is that Little Zhuang? Have you returned home? I was just saying I should call you these past few days. How is your health? Are you alright...?”

Hearing this, **Zhuang Rui** couldn't help but blush. He hadn't even thought to call and report his safe arrival after returning home, only remembering others when he needed something. He quickly said, “**Uncle De**, I'm very well, and my health is fine. After the New Year, I'll try to go back to work early. I called specifically to let you set your mind at ease.”

“It's good that you're fine. Don't rush back to work; rest longer at home. I've arranged everything here at the **Pawnshop**, so don't worry. Please wish your mother a Happy New Year for me. If there's nothing else, I'll hang up. I have a bunch of apprentices here paying their New Year respects...”

It was a bit noisy on **Uncle De**'s end. He was a well-known figure in the **City Name** antique world, with a large group of disciples and grand-disciples, so his home was always bustling during the New Year.

“**Uncle De**, I actually have something I need to ask you about...”, These two pieces of calligraphy were very important to **Zhuang Rui**, so he dispensed with formalities.

“Oh? Then wait a moment, I'll step outside to take the call...”

Uncle De was somewhat surprised. This kid wasn't interested in the things he knew, and though they had been together for a year, he had never heard **Zhuang Rui** use the word “ask for guidance.”

“**Uncle De**, here's the thing. My family's old house is being demolished, and when I went to clear out my grandfather's belongings, I found two pieces of calligraphy. They read: 'How do I know the Phoenix is not inferior to me?' and 'Eat clams and stop asking Heaven.' The signature is the two characters 'Da Fang.' As you know, I'm completely ignorant about these things—I have seven apertures, but six are blocked, leaving me utterly clueless. I have no choice but to seek guidance from you, sir...”

Zhuang Rui also reported the dimensions of the two pieces of calligraphy to **Uncle De**, feeling genuinely anxious, afraid that **Uncle De** might not know the origin of the works either.

After hearing what **Zhuang Rui** said, **Uncle De** burst into hearty laughter and said, “You brat are unlearned and untalented! Before, when I asked you to learn things from me, you kept making excuses. Now you realize there's no harm in knowing more subjects, right...”

Zhuang Rui naturally apologized repeatedly and promised that he would learn more knowledge from **Uncle De** in the future. Only then did he manage to clarify the identity and background of Da Fang.

Da Fang was also known as Fang Dishan, born in 1873. His original name was Fang Erqian, and his courtesy name was Dishan. He was from Jiangdu County (now Yangzhou City) in Jiangsu Province and was born into a scholarly family (his father, Fang Peisen, was a successful candidate in the imperial examination during the Tongzhi reign of the late Qing Dynasty, and served as a local educational official for many years). He excelled in calligraphy and couplets, and was a famous scholar, calligrapher, and couplet expert during the late Qing and early Republican periods.

Fang Dishan was intelligent and talented from a young age, excelling in calligraphy and mastering studies such as epigraphy, painting, and ancient book editions. His calligraphy was vigorous and lofty, possessing a sense of wilderness. He was known for being playfully eccentric, unrestrained, frivolous, humorous, and unkempt. At the age of 13, he passed the imperial examination for the rank of Xiu Cai (Scholar). He later taught at the Beiyang Military Academy and became an intimate friend and in-law of Yuan Shikai's second son, Yuan Kewen. He also formed a friendship despite the age gap with the then-unfamous painter Zhang Daqian.

Fang Dishan was skilled at composing couplets, especially name-embedding couplets and witty couplets, inheriting the style of Xie Jin of the Ming Dynasty and Ji Yun of the Qing Dynasty, valuing cleverness and ingenuity. The name-embedding couplets he composed for others were entirely improvised, never drafted, appearing naturally flawless, with highly refined wording. He often integrated classical allusions seamlessly, leaving no trace of effort, making them truly unique. At the time, he was known as the “Saint of Couplets” of the Republic of China era.

“**Uncle De**, does our **Pawnshop** have any works by Fang Dishan?”

After hearing **Uncle De**'s introduction, **Zhuang Rui** realized that Fang Dishan could be considered a master in the field of modern calligraphy. However, he now wanted to find another piece of Fang Dishan's work to see if he could absorb **Spiritual Qi** from it.

“Our **Pawnshop** doesn't have any, but...”

Uncle De pondered for a moment, then continued, “There are quite a few surviving works by Fang Dishan. Some collectors in **City Name** do have them. You're asking about the price, right? Because many pieces survived, the price of his works isn't very high. Your two pieces form a couplet, and the price should be between eight thousand and fifteen thousand. Since they were left by an elder, you should keep them. If you need money, tell me, **Uncle De**, and I can lend you some.”

Seeing that **Uncle De** had misunderstood his intention, **Zhuang Rui** quickly said, “**Uncle De**, that's not what I meant. I was mainly interested in Fang Dishan as a person because of the items left by my elder, and that led me to wonder what other works he has. When I return to **City Name**, please just take me to visit some people who have collected his works.”

Since he could no longer absorb **Spiritual Qi** from this couplet, **Zhuang Rui** wanted to see if he could absorb **Spiritual Qi** from Fang Dishan's other works.

“That's no problem. Bring that couplet when the time comes, and I'll take you to meet some collector friends for an exchange.”

Uncle De was very happy to hear **Zhuang Rui**'s words. The Antique World prioritizes character, and **Zhuang Rui** was honest and reliable. **Uncle De** had always had an excellent impression of him and had wanted to bring him into the business but hadn't succeeded. Now that **Zhuang Rui** was coming to him, **Uncle De** was overjoyed.